

The World Buddhist University SUNDAY FORUM

Buddhist Meditation Techniques Practiced in Thailand



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On the First Sunday of the Month of June, .Sunday June 6, 2553(2010), 12.00-13.30, Dr. Suthira Duangsamorn was the guest speaker of the Buddhist Forum talking on **Buddhist Meditation Techniques Practiced in Thailand** The guest speaker was Dr. Suthira Duangsamorn, a long-time resident of Bangkok and independent scholar, who retired from Assumption University of Thailand as Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature. Her studies of Thai writers and Thai culture have given her a special vantage point of the topic meant to serve as an introduction to various meditation techniques and the five most famous meditation masters of Thailand. Married to Dr. Somboon Duangsamorn, Honorary Rector of International Buddhist College in Songkhla, who is a frequent guest speaker on the Buddhist Forum, Dr. Suthira now lives a quiet life writing a book set in the 40's and 50's of her native Berlin.

Dr. Suthira Duangsamorn gave her lecture with the well - known masters of meditation in Thailand as follows :

1. Acharn Mun

Phra Acharn Mun Bhuridatto is a native of Ubon Ratchathani. He lived from 1870-1949. At the age of 15, he became a novice for two years. He was ordained a monk in 1873 and was given the religious name Bhuridatto (Blessed with Wisdom). His first teacher was Acharn Sao Kantasillo. He excelled as a student and followed his teacher on visits to Laos and Burma. They practiced meditation together. Later, Acharn Mun helped his master to establish the forest mediation tradition (or Kammathana tradition).

Acharn Mun continued his travels alone, through Thailand, Burma and Laos, to look for a highly attained meditation master, dwelling for most of the time in forests. According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, a student in Acharn Mun's lineage, his "search took nearly two decades and involved countless hardships as he tracked he sought. Gradually, he realized that he would have to follow the Buddha's example and take the wilderness itself as his teacher."

Archan Mun's samatha-vipassana is also known as BUDDHO meditation because of its characteristic of using the breath together with the recitation of BUD while inhaling and DHO while exhaling. The purpose of using the word Budhho along with the breath is a technique that helps the mind to focus on one-pointedness. Basically, this technique is that of anapanasati, mindfulness of breath, which was discovered by the young Prince Siddhartha when he was sitting under the jambolan tree while his father performed the customary Royal Ploughing ceremony.

It is possible to discern here the suitability of anapanasati, together with ascetic practices or *dhudanga* and strict discipline as a well-known technique to promote concentration and deeper meditation practice. Acharn Mun stressed that the practice should be supported by the Dhamma discussed during meditation. Else, practitioners must focus on a meditation object at each moment. They should be present when experiencing seeing, hearing, tasting, touching or smelling. They should be present when thoughts and feelings about various contexts (good or bad) occur. These things, like inconsistency, stress and non-self occur naturally, and display the truth for them to see at all times. This approach helps them to contemplate things with their mindfulness and discernment all the time; it is like they are listening to the Dhamma at all times, both day and night.

Acharn Mun observed four ascetic practices out of the total of thirteen all throughout his life.

1. The practice of wearing robes made from thrown-away cloth.
2. The practice of going for alms.
3. The practice of eating one's food only from one's bowl.
4. The practice of eating no more than one meal a day

The ascetic practices are ways to eradicate defilements. Besides, he also observed the practice of living in the wilderness, which for him was at least one kilometer from the nearest village, from time to time.

Archan Mun had many followers in his life time. At present, his teachings and mode of practice are recognized as a good model which has attracted numerous people to seek enlightenment. His meditation technique subsequently spread through Thailand and countries abroad.

The lineage of the forest monk tradition can be traced through:

Acharn Sao Kantasilo (1941)

Acharn Mun (1949)

Acharn Luang Ta Bua (in his late 90's now)

Acharn Chah (1992)

Acharn Sumedho (the first Westerner ordained in 1996)

And many monks seeking enlightenment at Wat Pah Nanachat at present

2. The Rising-Falling Meditation of the Abdomen

The Rising-Falling Meditation of the Abdomen can be traced back to one of the famous Burmese meditation masters, Mahasi Sayadaw Shin Sobhana who lived from 1904 to 1982.

Sayadaw became a monk in 1923, and after passing the state examination became a Dhamma teacher in 1941.

As a meditation master he had a significant influence on the teaching of Satipatthana Vipassana meditation in the West and throughout Asia.

He is recognized as a leading teacher of this technique in Myanmar and considered its founder in Thailand. His style of meditation involved quietly noting the rising and falling of the abdomen during breathing.

At that time the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition was famous in Burma, a first meditation centre was set up in here. Sayadaw sent Sayadaws U Asabha Vipassana meditation at the request of Thailand.

Phra Maha Teerarach Mahateerachar also known as Venerable Jodok, who had passed the highest level of the Pali state examination and went to study the Sayadaw Tradition in Burma, on his return started to teach this technique at Wat Mahadhatu to Thai Buddhists and foreigners in Thailand. He was honoured later with the appointment of Chief Master for Vipassana Meditation in Thailand.

The Mahasi Sayadaw method of vipassana meditation gained wide support in Thailand and many meditation centres came into existence by the year 1960. The number of trained meditators exceeded hundreds of thousands all over Thailand.

This technique, popularly known as “Yup Nor Pong Nor” , is meant to note the rising-falling movement of the abdomen with every breath. The practitioners mentally recite ‘Rising’ as the abdomen moves up during inhalation and ‘Falling’ as the abdomen moves down during exhalation. The attention is not on the process of breathing; but the rising and falling of the abdomen. The words that are used, ‘Rising’ and ‘Falling’ are tools of awareness. It is only the starting point of the practice, which is often preceded by Walking Meditation to keep the mind on a common focus.

The main aim of the technique is to observe any mental or physical processes that occur within the present moment. If the mind will not stay fixed on the rising-falling of the abdomen, it should be noted as ‘wandering’. When one has noted ‘wandering’ once or twice, the mind usually stops wandering. Then, the exercise of noting ‘rising, falling’ should be continued. Any other mental activities that occur during meditation must be contemplated and called by their name.

The technique can produce deep concentration and clear insights into the mind/body processes. This is called Vipassana-nana, insight knowledge that leads to enlightenment. The following insights are: to see rising-extinction of *nama* and *rupa*, impermanence of *nama* and *rupa* (anicang), non-self of *nama* and *rupa*, detachment from the five Aggregates or *nama* and *rupa*. **The Five Aggregates** : *Rupa* is form, *Nama* is feeling(vedana), perception (sanna), mental formation (sankhara), consciousness (vinnana) Constantly practicing, the mind realizes what defilements are eradicated. A noble one can be expected to emerge.

3. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's Anapanasati

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) has been lauded as "easily one of the most influential teachers in the Buddhist history of Siam." The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) honoured him as one of the world's great personalities. To Thais he is praised for his discerning knowledge of the scriptures and his efforts to establish and explain the correct and essential principles of Buddhism. Since the 1960's activists and thinkers in areas such as education, ecology, social welfare, and rural development have drawn on his teachings and advice. His profound sermons have influenced all serious Thai Buddhists and his writings and books transcribed from his talks have filled a whole room in the National Library. More than that, for all his erudition, the monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (a bhikkhu who is a servant of the Buddha), was also known as a great meditation master.

Here one can perhaps quote from Phra Acharn Mun's sermon, The Ever-Present Truth, of what he thought of the duty of monks to teach meditation:

Has anyone ever been ordained in the Buddha's religion without having studied meditation? We can say categorically no-there hasn't . There isn't a single preceptor who doesn't teach meditation to the ordinand before presenting him with his robes. If a preceptor doesn't teach meditation beforehand, he can no longer continue being a preceptor. So every person who has been ordained can be said to have studied meditation. There is no reason to doubt this.

In 1932, Buddhadasa established Suan Mokkhabalaram (The Grove of the Power of Liberation). At that time it was the only forest Dhamma centre and one of the few places dedicated to *vipassana* meditation in Southern Thailand. Buddhadasa clearly distinguished between 'sitting meditation for *samatha*' and 'sitting meditation for *vipassana*'. Their purposes are different. The first one aims to attain concentration first, the latter aims to develop *vipassana*. The same goes for walking meditation.

He gave precise instructions for meditation practice in his book *Anapanasati Bhavana*, and explains how the investigation of breath helps develop awareness (*sati*) and controls the mind.

For example, if the breath is strong, it is unrefined. If it is a smooth breath, it is refined. States of mind such as anger, fear, anxiety, etc. affect the mind and are included in the category of unrefined breath. The practitioners mentally recite 'refined' or 'unrefined' as the case may be.

The investigation of the breath continues with '*rupa*' and '*nama*' (form and mental formation). *Rupa* in this case is the breath, and *nama* is *sati*, the awareness that knows the breath as it flows in and out. As the practitioners continue they can perceive the states of non-self, and the mind becomes less clinging and ultimately reaches the stages of relinquishment of defilements.

Whether sitting or walking, the practitioners can see these states all the time. From then on, the meditation goes on by itself both day and night. Buddhadasa believed that nibbana is for everyone, and advises us to see nibbana in the nature surrounding us. He openly compared Dhamma with Thammachat. Nature teaches us about nibbana all the time:

When seeing a fire go out or something cooling down, look for the meaning of nibbana in it. When bathing and drinking ice water, when a breeze blows or rain falls, take notice of the meaning of nibbana. Whenever a fever subsides, a swelling goes down, or a headache goes away, recognize the meaning of nibbana as found in spiritual deathlessness. If one sees this fact, they will personally experience that we can survive only through this kind of nibbana. We do not survive just because of rice and food that so infatuates people.

Buddhadasa explained that Nibbana is not just about the passing away of the Buddhas or arahants. It is the essence of our life, and he urged us to see the importance of nibbana in our daily life thus:

Whenever you feel coolness in your experience, mark the coolness firmly in your heart, and breathe in and out. Breathing in is cool, breathing out is cool. In cool, out cool-do this for a little while. This is an excellent lesson that will help you become a lover of nibbana (*nibbanakama*) more quickly. The consciousness will develop in an enlightened way more than if you do not practice like this. Naturally nibbana-the unquenching of defilements-will occur more often and easily. This is the best way to help nature (understand and study nibbana).

He believed that nibbana is a natural process and could be carried out anywhere, anytime. Acharn Mun's strict ascetic practices while living amidst forests, the Sayadaw tradition of keeping the mind firmly fixed on the body, and Buddhadasa's *vipassana* meditation may be different from one another, but they differ only in that they are expressions of each teacher's individuality; their temperaments, experience as well as mental and spiritual makeup. What is common to all is that they arrived at their techniques through the teachings of the Buddha, to be exact, The Mahasatipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the principle practice for mental development. All methods have something to do with breathing, the anapanasati know to the Buddha at a young age, or regarding one's body, and beyond, by looking at nature.

4. Dynamic Meditation

Dynamic Meditation is a well known meditation technique introduced by Luangpor Teean, or Venerable Father Teean, an important teacher of Buddhism in Thailand. His technique can be characterized as "dynamic" in contrast to the more conventional methods of "static" meditation. The Thai meditation master expounded the goal of Buddhist meditation with an unsurpassed vividness and authenticity that makes it unique among the various schools of contemporary Buddhism.

Luangpor Teean lived from 1911-1988. He was born in a small village in Loei Province. At the age of 10 he became a novice in a local monastery where his uncle was a resident monk. He spent eighteen months studying ancient Buddhist scripts, as well as meditation and magic before he disrobed to return to his home.

At the age of 20 he was ordained a monk for six months. His interest in meditation continued to grow and he practiced regularly, even after he disrobed, got married and had a family. He became a successful trader sailing in his own boat along the Mekhong River between Thailand and Laos. His interest in pursuing the Dhamma continued to grow.

At the age of 46, after settling his business affairs and providing for the security of his family, he left his home, determined to search for the true Dhamma, as many years of making merit and practicing meditation had not liberated him from anger. In Nongkhai Province he met a Laotian meditation teacher who taught him a form of body-moving meditation, where each movement and pause at the end of the movement was accompanied by the silent recitation of the words "moving-stopping".

Having practiced many forms of meditation over the preceding thirty-five years, all involving concentration on breathing-and also in the most cases inner recitation-he had only obtained transitory calmness. He therefore decided to abandon such techniques. Instead he began to practice body moving meditation, but without inner recitation.

On the third day of practice a sudden knowledge came to his mind: instead of experiencing himself as he always did, he now understood *rupa-nama* (body-mind). His awareness was sufficiently continuous and he made fast progress.

In later years, much of his teaching would be concerned with the details of the steps and stages through which the mind progressed on its way to end suffering. He began to teach what he called the Dhamma of "an instant".

Perhaps, there is some truth in the idea that nibbana is a natural process. Left to nature, it is somehow bound to happen. Luangpor Teean believed that this dynamic mediation could be practiced by everyone, irrespective of nationality, religion, sex or age, monks or layperson, because everybody has body and mind. Everyone can get to the end of suffering. Whether the practitioners observe the precepts or not, it does not matter, as far as they see their mind all the time, one will do, speak and think, only the right things.

Luangpor Teean developed this remarkable insight when he was a layman, and started to teach his technique to laypeople in his village. At the age of 48 he entered the monkhood in order to be in a better position to teach. At his ordination he was given the Pali name "Cittasubho" (the Brilliant Mind), but people continued to call him Luangpor Teean. He was known by that name throughout the rest of his life.

His dynamic style of meditation seems to be still practiced, because it does not matter if you are standing, walking, sitting or lying down. Even with minor movements one can practice developing awareness all day during one's life whenever the body moves. One does not close the eyes, nor lay still. The movement of the body is mainly used to develop awareness. One does not have to do rhythmic practice in a sitting position every time, one may do something else, such as walking meditation, moving the hands up and down, rubbing the fingers, moving the feet, blinking the eyes, etc.

Developing awareness will lead you to achieve liberating knowledge (*panna*) from a clean, calm and clear mind. *Panna* will release you from suffering. You will have feeling-perception-mental

formation-consciousness that does not suffer anymore. Whenever the body moves, be aware of the movement immediately and continuously. Whenever thought or any object arises, know it/see it every time. This is the meaning of awareness of body and mind. Developing awareness does not resist any thought, but on the contrary the mind is wide open to face everything bravely. Thought is free to arise, but you always have to know it, to see it, and to understand it with mindfulness.

Having active and continuous awareness, one will see thought as soon as it arises. One will see the source of thought which is the cause of suffering. One will attain the state of Koet-Dap (arising-extinguishing) of the mind, the state of enlightenment.

5. Vija Dhammakaya

This unique meditation practice was discovered by a scholarly monk, Venerable Chao Khun Phramongkol Thepmuni (Sod Chantasaro), who believed it to be lost during the first five hundred years after the passing away of the Lord Buddha.

Also known as Luangpor Sod, the Venerable who hails from Supanburi Province, reintroduced the method and is considered its founder. In 1916 he attained a high stage of enlightenment after seriously practicing this method. He called what he attained Vija Dhammakaya.

Candasaro Bhikkhu lived from 1884-1959. He entered the monkhood in 1906 and after 10 years of ordination, having deeply understood the Buddhist scriptures and the principle of meditation practice, his name spread as an excellent scholar and strict meditation monk. In his meditation he was able to penetrate the full depth of the Dhamma as it was revealed to and by the Buddha. It appeared in the centre of his body, two finger-breadths above the navel. After discovering Vija Dhammakaya is practiced widely in Thailand and abroad.

This technique is based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Mahasatipatthana 4) and leads the practitioner directly along the path to enlightenment by combining *Samatha* (Concentration) and *Vipassana* (Insight Meditation). Samatha meditation aims at concentration to remove the Five Hindrances.

Lord Buddha taught altogether forty meditation devices. Vija Dhammakaya makes use of three of these simultaneously, namely illumination (*aloka kasina*), repetition of the word *samma arahang*, and mindfulness of breathing or *anapanasati*. This method can produce a supernatural power which is very helpful to practitioners of this school who seek enlightenment.

During practice, the practitioners closely follow a luminous sphere or other objects, which is able to tell them at which stage of attainment they have arrived. The more they meditate the brighter and brighter the sphere becomes which is replaced by bigger and brighter spheres which in their final stage resembles not only the practitioner but also the Buddha. Thus the practitioner can pass through eighteen internal body-minds until he reaches the non-compound Dhammakaya and temporarily attains nibbana.

